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# The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower, by Michael Pillsbury

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### A BIT OF A MAVERICK

Pillsbury, Michael. *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower*. New York: Henry Holt, 2015. 319pp. \$30

*The Hundred-Year Marathon* is the culmination of a lifetime's work on Chinese security policy by Dr. Michael Pillsbury (1945–), an independent China analyst based in Washington, D.C. The book is popular, not academic. That said, it is by and large accurate and must be read and digested.

At the outset, though, two issues must be raised. One is the title. The other is the author. The title suggests, with no evidence, that somehow a secret Masonic cabal has existed in China for a century, having as its purpose the overthrow of the United States as leading world power. Taken literally that would mean planning got under way in 1915, under President Yuan Shikai, continued during Chiang Kai-shek's watch, and then on through Mao Zedong and beyond—which, bluntly put, is not history at all, but classic tinfoil-hat conspiracy theory. China's changing international behavior over the last century is indeed difficult to explain, but it is most certainly not the product of some arcane "Protocols for the Replacement of America."

As for Pillsbury, he is well-trained, hard-working, and independently wealthy.

He is the author of original and definitive books about the People's Liberation Army. He is also a bit of a maverick: a one-man show, rarely part of a team. Long a proponent of pro-China policies, including sale of weapons to Beijing in the 1980s and 1990s, he has, as he tells it, changed his mind as he has learned more. While a "panda hugger" he was well treated and given much "access"—which means access to people whose job is to deceive you, as well as hospitality. In 2006, however, he published an article in the *Wall Street Journal* decisively repudiating his previous views—and felt the back of Beijing's hand until 2013. Then he was able to return to China, as Beijing sought to shore up support, faced with the South China Sea crisis, to be discussed below (pages 129–30).

Pillsbury is not to be believed without question. He has had numerous run-ins with counterintelligence officials owing to his seemingly uncontrollable proclivity to leak secrets—to this reviewer, for example, in the passenger seat of his vintage Jaguar motorcar.

Here, however, we are reviewing neither the sales strategy nor the author of this book, but rather its argument.

The book makes two fundamental contentions. First, Pillsbury states that the Asian region and the United States currently face the problem of an unexpectedly aggressive China. Second, he argues that this unpleasant surprise is no more than the product of decades of official self-delusion about Beijing, even when confronted with mountains of facts that supported opposite conclusions. This reviewer agrees with these two points, albeit with many academic caveats that will be spared. Disagreement arises only when speculation begins about the future.

For roughly forty years, from the Nixon diplomacy of the 1970s to about 2010, the idea that China could pose a threat militarily was considered so mistaken as to be effectively beyond toleration in either academic or governmental circles. The insistent conviction was that “engagement” would transform China into a strong economy, a friend, even an ally, and most likely a democracy as well (page 7). Among the few in Washington not convinced by these arguments was the longtime head of the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment, Andrew Marshall, who did much to support Pillsbury’s work through contract research.

China is of course a new country. The first states having that word as part of their official names were founded in the last century: the Republic of China in 1911; then after the Chinese civil war, the People’s Republic of China in 1949. Before that a myriad of states, some ethnically Chinese, some not, rose and fell on the East Asian plain. To lump them all together as a political “China” to be treated as a historical entity having thousands of years of history is a profound error, as specialists now recognize. Still, the continuity of a

distinct culture belonging to the Chinese people must not be underestimated.

If one were to undertake a comprehensive study of the view of force within this cultural tradition, the first consideration would be the extreme pacifism expressed in the classics of Confucianism, created two millennia in the past, and long official orthodoxy. The mainstream of Chinese thought—not a pretense but a conviction—sees superior virtue and civilization as the way to genuine power, as is testified by the vast corpus of classical writings, memorized by scholars for generations and not forgotten today, as well as the volumes of official memorandums on foreign policy, in which opposition to force is regularly the winning argument.

Pillsbury, however, makes no claim to be writing about “China” in general or even broadly about today’s People’s Republic. He says little about Confucianism because others have said much, and focuses instead on the all-but-forbidden tradition of writers on military topics, the *bingjia* whose heyday was also two millennia ago, but whose influence has continued, like an underground stream, ever since, to emerge today in what Pillsbury calls “the Chinese hawks,” or *yingpai*.

Seemingly overlooked by official American estimates, these hawks have no truck with engagement, are deeply antforeign and anti-American, and seek Chinese hegemony to be achieved through deception, strategic dominance, and the use of particularly effective weapons usually called in English, rather awkwardly, “assassins’ maces” (*shashoujian*). They do not lack influence.

Pillsbury has come to know and understand this group by employing the most elementary but often neglected methods of information gathering:

namely, reading their work and having long conversations with them (he speaks excellent Chinese). The results of years of such research, by Pillsbury and others, effectively upend the conventional wisdom of nearly half a century. The questions that follow are: First, how did we go wrong? And second, what to do now?

To answer the first question, “what went wrong,” requires going back to President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger. That China would reenter the international system was long a near certainty in their time. Maoism was beginning to be recognized internally as having been an unmitigated catastrophe, not only for the Chinese people, but also for the military—though many foreigners still idolized the man. The Soviet Union moreover presented China with a threat requiring a counterweight. The only question was how exactly China would return. Sadly, these two Americans devised an utterly unrealistic plan that set our diplomacy on a course that, unsurprisingly, has brought unexpected and baleful consequences.

Nixon and Kissinger seem to have imagined a future in which an intimate Beijing–Washington political axis would supersede the entire then-existing security system in Asia. Such a vision seems the only possible explanation for Nixon’s quite astonishing question to Mao when they met on 21 February 1972: “Is it better for Japan to be neutral, totally defenseless, or it is [*sic*] better for a time for Japan to have some relations with the United States? The point being—I am talking now in the realm of philosophy—in international relations there are no good choices.”

Put bluntly, Nixon seems already to have decided, long before the meeting, to drop relations with Japan, then our

closest ally, in favor of China. (Japan was of course kept in the dark.) But Mao was bored and somnolent as the two leaders spoke. Neither he nor any other Chinese ever took up this offer.

How could so unrealistic an American policy plan have come into being? The answer is by wishful thinking and self-deception: in this case, aided by the rigorously selective limitation of sources to those that supported the policy already adopted. Only a tiny secret team knew of the plan. The books they read were uniformly from the strongly pro-Mao school of writing then current (Kissinger, *White House Years* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1979], p. 1051). Other books, many by better scholars, existed but were not consulted. Likewise, the speaker invited to the White House to enlighten the Americans was the erratic Frenchman André Malraux. Others were incomparably more knowledgeable and available—to name but two, the American Foreign Service officer Edward E. Rice and the Berlin professor Jürgen Domes—but they were not even contacted. Thus, information that had been intentionally biased formed the deepest foundation for our policy. But the longed-for axis between Beijing and Washington never came into being. Quite the opposite happened.

Starting in the first decade of this century, with now-retired leaders holding the reins, China openly changed its visible foreign policy to dangerous military adventurism, for reasons no one can explain. The change has not succeeded. Thus the conquest of Scarborough Shoal undertaken in spring 2012, which Beijing no doubt expected to be a military cakewalk against the Filipinos, has turned into a military and diplomatic standoff, drawing in

more players, losing China prestige, and showing no sign of ending (page 203).

It is as yet unclear that continuing irresponsible expansion will be the gravamen of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy. China's current leader took power in November 2012 months after the Scarborough Shoal standoff began and while he has not repudiated the policy he seems far more intent on domestic reform.

China could even liberalize: recently the down-market and often xenophobic Beijing tabloid *Global Times* attacked Western "pro-China" scholars for insulting that country by explaining away repression as the only answer to otherwise inevitable chaos. "Western scholars have never imagined that China might have a 'peaceful democratic transition,'" the tabloid observed (8 March 2015). These astonishing words did not appear by accident: the *Global Times* is wholly owned by the party's most authoritative mouthpiece, the *People's Daily*. Xi must be aware that even small external distractions will almost certainly derail domestic reform.

As for what the rest of the world should do, obviously it is time to prepare: to rearm and deter seriously. The region, however, is responding so robustly to Chinese aggression that Beijing is alarmed. Japan today is not a mighty power only because it chose to try peace instead. Let no one doubt that if Tokyo deems it necessary, it will emerge again—indeed that is its current direction—which would be perhaps the greatest imaginable setback possible for the Chinese political and economic future. Nearly every other state in Asia too, from India to the Philippines and beyond, is rapidly and effectively preparing military capabilities that

could present China with a nightmare scenario in which it is at war with a multiplicity of capable adversaries along a front of more than four thousand miles, from India to Tokyo.

Pillsbury speaks of the risk of prematurely "asking the weight of the emperor's cauldrons," or *wending* (page 196), which sounds exotic. What it means is showing your cards too soon. China has in fact done just this, with the consequences the Chinese sages would have predicted: creating failure as others react in time. My conclusion: we will certainly soon see a highly militarized Asia; we may see some skirmishes or worse (though recall that the Chinese esteem most those victories achieved without fighting; they abhor long-term, attritional war), but we most emphatically will not see Chinese hegemony, either in the region or in the world.

ARTHUR WALDRON



Morris, David J. *The Evil Hours: A Biography of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. 338pp. \$27

The numbers are staggering. In 2012 the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) estimated that eight thousand veterans take their own lives every year. Think about that—twenty-two people die every day of whom many, in pain and having lost hope, have carried their war with them for far too long. For some it may have been recent fighting in Afghanistan or Iraq; for others it may have been decades ago in the jungles of Southeast Asia. Regardless, the trauma these people experienced knows no boundaries between deserts and mountains, between marshes and